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Introduction

Over time, I have come to believe that neurasthenia – that *fin-de-siècle* chronic fatigue syndrome – and, to a lesser extent, hysteria, are not simply surface features of the lives of certain characters in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, but figures that, in important ways, condition the Proustian notion of style, and organize and structure both the aesthetic debate in the novel and the life messages it conveys. It would be silly to want to reduce Proust's great work to an early twentieth-century case-study in the naturalist vein; but the novel should be read, at least on one level, as a *fin-de-siècle* moral tale in which art and aesthetics conquer medical determinism. It is, after all, the story of a 'nervous Narrator'[1] who struggles against negative hereditary factors in his family (personified in the semi-invalid aunt Léonie), and who suffers from a chronic lack of drive that makes him prefer salon time to productive time alone. If Proust's protagonist belongs to a long line of what Roy Porter has called articulate sufferers,[2] and if it is arguable that *A la recherche* is a narrative of disease, it is in part because there is a medico-psychological context to the novel, with familial, societal and literary components, that requires further exploration than it has received to date. We should not forget, for instance, that one of Proust's earliest titles for his work, 'Les Intermittences du cœur', had medical overtones as well as the emotional ones that are at first most evident. On at least two occasions, Proust indicated that this title alluded, in the world of the mind, to a disease of the body (*Corr.*, XI, 257; XII, 177). He might have noted discussions of nervous arrhythmia in a number of medical works, and perhaps especially in 1904–5 when he read the study of Dr Paul Dubois, *Les Psychonévroses et leur traitement moral*[3] as he considered treatment for his own neurasthenia.

What led me towards hysteria and neurasthenia was an initial focus on certain aspects of Proust's compulsive attitude towards

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social language and non-fictional writing. There is a loathing of conversation and social exchange in Proust which is both intriguing and contradictory, given his lifelong practice of social writing genres – his society columns, for instance, and his abundant correspondence. This anomaly is personified in Proust's reaction to Sainte-Beuve. In his earliest adolescent writings, Proust likes to play the Beuvian role of arbiter of literary taste. In December 1887, when he was just sixteen years old, Proust wrote two columns for the schoolboy review *Lundi*, entitled 'Causerie dramatique' and 'Causerie littéraire'. The style borrows from Sainte-Beuve and from the drama critic of the *Journal des Débats*, Jules Lemaître, while the titles recall the celebrated *Causeries du lundi*.[4] Not only is Proust tremendously attracted by Sainte-Beuve's style, to the point of appropriating it in pastiches that span twenty years, he also had moments of self-doubt when he identified closely with Sainte-Beuve. There are episodes in Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* which clearly suggest that Proust feared ending his career like the author of *Les Lundis*, a failed creative writer who had abandoned art for journalism.

What truly precipitated my interest, however, was Proust's labelling of Sainte-Beuve as a language hysteric (*ASB*, 37; *CSB*, 246), and his characterization of social language as one that too closely mimics bodily satisfactions and egocentric pleasure. If Proust longed to be Sainte-Beuve, on the one hand, and repeatedly co-opted his language, but subsequently denied that language (because language took Sainte-Beuve over and made his body speak in his mind's place), then perhaps Proust was recognizing a psycholinguistic process in himself and was actually defining himself as a language hysteric. A second question seemed crucial: if hysteria was a condition of social language, could it be absent from the language of fiction?

At the same time, I began to be attracted both by what have been called the new hysteria studies, especially those that relate to narratives of hysteria in late nineteenth-century literature,[5] and by the renewed focus, among specialists of Proust, on the relationship between nervous ailments and writing. Some of the early French sorties into this latter field were not well received. George Rivane's book on the influence of asthma on Proust's writing was challenged immediately,[6] while Charles Briand's tome *Le Secret de Marcel Proust*[7] seemed to suggest that Proust's neuroses and complexes could be

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explained by the 'fact' that he had had a sexual relationship with his mother. More recent studies in French, mostly in article form, redirect our attention to the medicalized discourse of *A la recherche*, the warring writing styles of the positivistic physician and hygienist Adrien Proust and his decadent son Marcel, and the interplay between nervous debility and the creative hygiene available through artistic creation.[8]

My study seemed to divide itself naturally into four areas. One was the extent to which Proust felt affinities with mentor writers – Flaubert, Nerval and Baudelaire in particular, but Senancour as well, even the Goncourts – who suffered from, and whose work depicted or reflected the effects of, nervous conditions similar to his own. *A la recherche* is a novel of a quest for literary form that is superimposed on a search for volition. It is aboulia, the absence of willpower which was the very basis of the condition called neurasthenia, that artistic creation finally cures in Proust's Narrator.

Proust's readings in the fields of psychology, medicine and philosophy become an important reference point in this first chapter. Anne Henry has argued for the significance of 1894 in his life, the year he took philosophy courses at the Sorbonne. She proposes that Schelling and Schopenhauer were the seminal influences on Proust's aesthetics.[9] I would not quarrel with the importance of the year, but I see Proust as much more preoccupied with what he perceives as a quasi-medical problem, a difficulty in focusing his energies, a deficit of willpower. The literary consequence, already clearly expressed as he struggled with the writing of *Jean Santeuil*, was an inability to organize a form for his fiction.[10] I have therefore explored the influences of two writers on him, the psychologist-philosopher Théodule Ribot, who wrote extensively about diseases of the will and about affective (or involuntary) memory, and Dr Adrien Proust.

An argument can certainly be made that Adrien Proust's writings play an intertextual role in *A la recherche*. In 1896–7, at a time when Proust's first attempt at a real novel was withering on the vine, his father published two texts that relate to his son's ailment, a preface to a study of asthma and a manual on neurasthenia,[11] both of which point to a single solution for nerve-based conditions: a return to an active, regular, fresh-air lifestyle that develops the backbone for a more positive approach to life. Since 1885, Dr Proust had held the Chair of Hygiene at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris, and in a number of publications – including the quite literary *Revue des Deux*

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Mondes – he touted the universal benefits of hygiene. His son expressed a lifelong scorn for the doctor's literal-mindedness, and there are indications that *A la recherche* is structured to prove that art and literature, and not some more mundane contact with 'reality', represent the ultimate hygiene.

A second area of investigation was Proust's extraordinary anxiety about language. The obsessional fear of orality in Proust has many of the components of a hysterical phobia. The Proustian text endlessly presents spoken language as pure alienation. Proust the artist and the man are at home in silent contemplation, a form of intense communion, in a way they can never be when speaking. In the essay on reading which served as his preface to the Ruskin translation *Sésame et les lys*, Proust argues that speech diverts the individual from inner centredness, immobilizing him in a kind of trance where he is totally in the web of the Other. Social exchange sets up a dynamic that makes us copy language and external attitudes as though they were authentic phenomena, instead of simply words and attitudes copied in turn from others.

The surface texture of Proustian prose seems hysterical in the everyday sense: it has the aspect of an unstoppable flow, built of endless comparisons and reverberations, in which one senses an unconscious hunger not to stop. But there is a third sense in which Proustian language is hysterical. His protagonists – Jean Santeuil, the Narrator – act out a corporeal, gestural language that anticipates words. We often see the Narrator locked in wordless communion with objects and phenomena – the hawthorn, for example – that are kinetically simulated in order to be assimilated. The basic communication with our surroundings is thus via a mimetic language of the body which the writer's language, the language of art, must then reproduce in metaphor. Proust makes abundantly clear that this body language is the intuitive movement that prefigures writerly language; the objective of authentic writing must be to reproduce the initial mimesis of our impression.

Proust's encounter with Sainte-Beuve of 1908–9 was the occasion to confront the dilemma of orality versus writing. Proust's sense that the prelude to authentic style was the bodily copying of an impression had a dangerous pendant: his social habit of mimicking the voices and gestures of others. In Sainte-Beuve, Proust saw a slightly different level of oral mimicry being passed off as superior writing style. The text that labels Sainte-Beuve a language hysteric criticizes

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the constant witticisms in his prose as borrowings from the oral register.

Sainte-Beuve, and his hysterical desire to please through language, is very much present, just beneath the surface of the text, in the final aesthetic argument of *Le Temps retrouvé*, for his writing alerts the Narrator to two types of oral pitfalls in first-person writing. First, there is a constant naming activity that goes on in the individual as we ingest reality – the Proustian text calls it an oblique interior monologue – that classifies phenomenon and event. This voice masks the personal apprehension of reality in habitual language, that is, cliché. The mediocre writer never steps outside this voice. Second, a monologue in the first person also resembles another type of babble: talking to oneself. Interestingly enough, the Narrator frequently talks to himself. On a number of social occasions, for example, he catches himself re-creating the evening's dialogues as he tries to review and reposition experience to his own advantage. It is this Other-orientated, ego-based voice which he identifies as the Beuvian first person, and which he vows to exclude from his own writing.

This second chapter ends with an analysis of the relationship between oral voice, individuality and creativity in Proust's writer-character Bergotte. What is striking in the Proustian text's iterative and non-conclusive examination of this question, is the desire to conclude a pact between oral voice and tone, and accent and tone in literature. *A la recherche* appears to promote the notion that orality bears no relationship to the unique accent of a writer's fiction. At the same time, one senses in the text (in the attention devoted to understanding the rhythms and intonations of Bergotte's speech, for instance) a need to reconcile, or accommodate, this unique aspect of personality – oral accent – within the fuller individuality expressed in the writer's art.

In chapter 3, I investigate the need for another type of reconciliation: the acceptance that non-fictional forms have their role to play in shaping the Proustian 'text'. One of Proust's aesthetic anxieties is that literature remain pure. There is a correct hierarchy of writing styles, forms and genres that must be adhered to. Balzac is criticized because the style of his letters is hard to distinguish from that of his novels. Literary history has a trivial side because historians hold the naïve view that 'truth' is documentary and documentable: new finds of historical papers and manuscripts send them into orbit. Journal-

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ism often represents a transfer of oral blabbing on to a newspaper page, and the journalistic activity of Norpois, Brichot and Morel during the war defines their limits. Erudition is a way of disengaging the self from complex personal judgements about life and art. And literary critics are subject to intellectual boredom, for an emerging trend can quickly alter long-established, correct judgements: one day Corneille's masterpiece *Le Cid* is up, the next *Le Menteur* is in vogue. All these intellectual attitudes, with the writing stances that accompany them, are viewed as inferior to authentic creative writing.

The position of personal and social forms of writing poses a great problem for Proust, whether he considers his own production or that of others. What is the status of a writer's personal correspondence, for instance? The hero of *Jean Santeuil* is troubled and attracted by the exuberance of Balzac's and Flaubert's letters. Their conversation, the letters they write after a day of composition, must somehow reveal an aspect of their creative being, even though Proust presents them as 'inferior mechanisms' (*JS*, 486) of their thought. The correspondence of a writer like Flaubert, even though he is totally focused on an interior reality, may still communicate, in unarticulated form, the raw materials of his inner self, or, from time to time, even a perfectly sculpted literary phrase.

But given clear indications in the Proustian text that fiction and personal letters are immiscible, sacred-and-profane entities, it would be wrong to ignore two aspects of Proust's correspondence. Critics have recently begun to point out considerable transfers of materials from his letters to his novel,[12] and to wonder whether his letters were not, in many instances, the initial locus of inscription for certain ideas.[13] It is important to address this issue, for here is a clear discrepancy in Proust's aesthetic position. His letters are a direct extension of the social voice he insisted be absent from literature, and therefore a comparison of that epistolary voice and the narrating voice in *A la recherche* is essential.

Journalism was one of Proust's lifelong temptations. The perception, among members of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* group led by André Gide, that Proust was essentially a social columnist for *Le Figaro*, was a prime factor in their rejecting publication of his manuscript. The *A la recherche* episode of the appearance of the Narrator's article in *Le Figaro* was juxtaposed, in the early manuscripts, with the sleeping/waking sequence that now serves as the definitive overture to *A la recherche*. The hero's reaction to that article

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was subsequently set within a description of Sainte-Beuve's self-important reaction to his own articles (see *ASB*, 17–18; *CSB*, 226–8). The stage was set, early on in Proust's plans, for a demonstration of the inferiority of journalistic writing. This, in itself, is not of major interest, but what is, perhaps, is the patching of some of Proust's social columns, articles and essays into the text of the novel, as though socially orientated writing and fiction were not so mutually exclusive after all. Proust the *rentier*, whose family investments supported his lifestyle, was an inveterate reinvester[14] of his own material, whatever its origin.

With literary criticism and pastiche, we observe two other facets of Proust's non-fictional writing that were clearly more acceptable for the artist – and Proust's true *péchés mignons* – as long as they remained secondary activities. Proust's view of literary criticism as attention to unconscious, reiterated currents in a writer's style and personality is a key to his own aesthetic as a novelist. Proust's text also insists, as we shall see, that the physical mechanics of the *pasticheur* are exactly the same mimetic movements that authentic writing must adopt. All true writing, like good pastiche, begins in the preverbal stage of mimesis. To end this chapter, I examine the Goncourt pastiche in *A la recherche*. As the novel moves towards its aesthetic destination, that is, writing that is authentic because copied from personal impressions, it is natural and necessary that it pause over the phenomenon of the pastiche, pointing mutely to the semi-creative mechanism that underlies it, before finally laying it to rest.

Chapter 4 returns to the question of transforming language into form and examines how a series of Proustian anxieties is invested in the structure of the novel. The years immediately preceding the writing of *A la recherche* were years of doubt and true nervousness during which Proust feared he might be suffering from a malady that could prevent him from carrying out any major creative project. His concerns about levels and types of language and about the juxtaposition of pure literature and lesser writing forms are evident in the early stages of the writing of his novel, and they remain explicitly present in the final version of *A la recherche* which Proust left us. At the same time, however, that final version consciously transgresses certain formal rules of the genre, and a well-developed sense of *insouciance* and mischief regarding form begins to make itself felt.

The re-editing of *A la recherche* in the second Pléiade edition has given readers wider access to Proust's manuscript drafts,[15] and those

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manuscripts have brought critics back to absolutely basic issues of language and form. At one level, they have reopened the debate about the unfinished nature of *A la recherche*. In spite of a surface level of completion, an essential feature of the novel's form is that it remained open, both to new episodes and changed directions in old ones, until the end, that is, until the day in 1922 when Proust died. One position that has been put forcefully is that Proust's construction method was by fragments, and that perhaps the fragment has equal weight, in the evaluation of Proust's technique, with the author's efforts at sewing the narrative together.[16] An interesting aspect of these fragments is that they may recur, or be reused, across all of Proust's writing. At every level, the Proustian text structures itself through iteration, and iteration is copying. Albertine's love affair with the Narrator replicates aspects of Swann's relationship with Odette; sixteen iterative versions of the opening sleeping–waking sequence are written before the phrase 'Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure' is isolated; and one of the key artistic productions of *A la recherche*, the text on the Martinville spires jotted down by the adolescent Narrator, is actually a recontexted piece that Marcel Proust had published in *Le Figaro*.

Proust's habit of rewriting material should be viewed in the context of his self-quotation, his myriad borrowings from previous inscriptions of the same idea. The reiterated writing of important insights is the basic narrative act for Proust, and it seems not at all far-fetched to relate that copying process, in turn, to the quasi-hysterical mimesis that is the origin of Proust's style. The writer inwardly reproduces the physical attitude or movement or rhythm of an object or idea, until he recognizes how the form relates to the meaning, and until he can formulate one more copy, a metaphor which will replicate in words the inward copy he has produced.

Proust not only quotes himself in his novel, he copies what others have said as well, true to the image he presents us of his Narrator: a porous, impressionable individual who is invaded by the language of his every interlocutor. In *A la recherche*, much research is beginning to show the borrowings – even the plagiarism[17] – that are the fabric of the Proustian text. Quotations, borrowings and intertextualities in *A la recherche* have unusual significance for a writer who had an obsessional fear of the language of the Other. The process of domesticating the Other's language to make it absorbable and controllable is all-important.

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The final section of chapter 4 reviews the nature of first-person narrative in *A la recherche* in the light of the linguistic obsessions mentioned above. Rather than following those who dwell on the differentiated 'I' in Proust and the distinctions between hero, Narrator and author, I believe emphasis needs to be placed on the way in which the first person very deliberately integrates all aspects of the Proustian personality, including Proust the translator, critic and journalist and, indeed, the director of the whole operation, Proust the organizer of his manuscripts. It is the unity of that voice, and its ubiquity, that guarantee the coherence of Proust's form. Expressed in that unique narrating tone and accent is the story of a writer, of a novel being written and of a search for voice. Encasement in that tone is a device that allows Proust to copy endlessly from himself, and into himself from outside, to align his personal, endless, hysterical flow of language with all sources of language, and to derive security and protection from the fragmentation of experience that is one of his novel's great subjects.

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CHAPTER I

Proust between neurasthenia and hysteria

Studies of hysteria, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, as medical fact and myth, and as a subject for literature, represent a burgeoning field that is both important and, as Mark Micale has put it in a recent and readable overview, 'hopelessly fashionable'.[1] The medicalization of human experience – and particularly of female experience – in the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century has attracted a major subset of these new hysteria studies.

As we now know, although French interest in hysteria peaked during Jean-Martin Charcot's years at La Salpêtrière Hospital, and particularly in the 1880s and 1890s, there was voluminous research and writing on the topic years earlier. Ten to twenty years before Charcot's 1862 appointment to La Salpêtrière, almost a third of French psychiatric theses were already dealing with hysteria.[2] Literature was showing interest in hysteria in the 1860s even as it was becoming a more widely publicized societal phenomenon. Emily Apter has neatly labelled as 'pathography' the mix of biography, fiction and clinical case history we find in Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), in the Goncourts' *Madame Gervaisais* (1868), and in Huysmans' *Marthe* (1876).[3] The model of the genre was no doubt *Germinie Lacerteux* (1864), and its notoriety was guaranteed because the brothers chose to stress the time-honoured link between hysteria and nymphomania.[4] In fact, the Goncourts' first novel, *Charles Demailly* (1860), was also a pathography, and its subject is one of the earliest portrayals of a condition that came to be known as neurasthenia, a quasi-clinical state of hypersensitivity coupled with nervous exhaustion.[5]

Not only was the novel taking its documentation from medical cases during this period, it was to some extent occupying a limelight that medico-psychiatric research would have preferred for itself. In 1881 Jules Claretie published a very popular novel, *Les Amours d'un*

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